Drive by traffic sites before venturing out

Forget radio reports – in some cities you can access government traffic cameras right from your computer

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In this hurry-up economy, ever increasing amounts of current information are being linked to the Internet. You can use a lot of this data to plan your time better, particularly in commuting and travelling.

Over the past 20 years, provincial and municipal governments have invested heavily in technology within major urban centers that permits them to monitor traffic conditions. As a result, they can figure out how to better manage traffic signals, to spot problems on major streets and highways, and to do what they can to improve traffic flow.

In a trend that's been quietly underway for some time, they've now linked this information to their Web sites.

If you are a regular commuter, you might find this information to be of use when you're heading out on the daily trek. It doesn't take long to find the up-to-date traffic information on-line,

If you live in Ontario, for example, you can access the Compass system of cameras. These are traffic cameras installed atop light standards along such major highways as the 401, the Queen Elizabeth Way and the 427 by the Ontario Ministry of Transportation.

Each camera takes a picture every few minutes that you can access through the Web site. Just visit the Web site of the Ontario government, and look for the Compass cameras on the main page. You can also get there directly through www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/traveller/compass/camera/camhome.htm

Major cities are also busy placing traffic information on-line, including Toronto, which provides online access to its RESCU system (www.city.toronto.on.ca/rescu/). This site allows you not only to examine the views from traffic cameras, but also gain access to a colour-coded map of traffic flow.

Accessing these sites might provide you with a better sense of the real conditions on the road.

This way, you can get a sense as to whether or not your commute to work will be a horrifying experience. Over at TrafficMontreal (www.trafficmontreal.com) you'll find similar information.

The City of Ottawa goes one step further — you can access the live video that is used by the city to monitor traffic conditions. (webcam.city.ottawa.on.ca/trafficvideo/video—en.htm).

Sure, you can listen to traffic reports on the radio — and you probably will, as you sit there fuming in traffic.

But accessing these sites might provide you with a better sense of the real conditions on the road.

Of course, it isn't just traffic information that you can find on-line. Most provincial governments are placing current road condition information on the Web as well.

That too is easy to find — simply spend some time browsing through the transportation section of your provincial government site.

For an example, take a look at the road reports from the B.C. Ministry of Transportation and Highways (www.th.gov.bc.ca/bchighways/roadreports/roadreports.htm).

What if you are planning a trip by air, or need to pick someone up at the airport?

You should be aware that most of the major airports in Canada have now linked their real-time flight data to the Internet. Visit the airport sites for Toronto, Edmonton, Halifax, Montreal, Winnipeg, Calgary or Vancouver and look under "real time flight information" or "flight schedules." There you will find the same arrival/departure screens seen in the airport.

You can do the same type of thing through major airline Web sites such as that of Air Canada, but airlines only allow you to access details on particular flights.

What if you are travelling by other methods? Check it out on-line. For example, BC Ferries has a site that provides up-to-the-minute information on schedules, as well as actual arrivals and departures and estimated wait times (www.bcferries.bc.ca/traffic/).

There can be a fun element to all of this information, particularly if you happen to be working at home, or somehow have avoided a trip during stormy conditions.

You can log onto any of the sites above to see just how bad things are out there for the poor sods who are stuck in their cars or at the airports.

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